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SUBJECT: ANC, COPE TO SLUG IT OUT IN EASTERN CAPE

REF: CAPE TOWN 000019

Classified By: Consul General Alberta Mayberry, Reason 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: South Africa's Eastern Cape province is the spiritual home of the African National Congress (ANC) and one of the ruling party's strongholds since the 1994 transition to majority rule, but the ANC breakaway Congress of the People (COPE) thinks it can give the ANC a run for its money there in the upcoming national election. Pol/Econoff spent a week in the province following COPE's January 24 manifesto launch in Port Elizabeth (Ref), and it was clear after meetings with politicians, academics, journalists, and traditional leaders that COPE has extensive support in the province, stemming from its efforts to align itself with the legacy of former President (and provincial native son) Thabo Mbeki and its appeals to traditional values. However, it does not appear this support will be enough for COPE to win a majority in the province on its own or in concert with other opposition parties. While ANC support may be on the wane, the ruling party's deep pockets and organizational acumen appears as if it will prove too much for COPE to take on. End summary.

EASTERN CAPE ANC HISTORICALLY STRONG BUT DIVIDED

¶2. (SBU) Although many parts of South Africa have been considered ANC strongholds since the 1994 polls, the Eastern Cape has a nearly mythic connection to the ruling party through the political lineage it has produced. Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu -- probably the party's three most prominent leaders in its history -- are all natives of the province's eastern Transkei region. The Mbeki family -- late Robben Island detainee Govan; his wife, ANC activist Epainette; and their son, Thabo -- also hail from the Transkei, while the Port Elizabeth and East London metropolitan areas produced several leading ANC-aligned activists in the 1970s and 1980s. The province is also home to Fort Hare University, which for the first half of the 20th century was the only university in the entire region open to non-white students and which counts Mandela and other regional political luminaries among its attendees.

¶3. (SBU) This history, as well as Thabo Mbeki's 1999-2008 tenure as national President, largely explains why the party has dominated Eastern Cape since the advent of majority rule. The ANC took 86 percent of the vote there in 1994, 74 percent in 1999, and 79 percent in 2004. The ANC also controls nearly all of the province's municipalities after local elections in 2006, and it currently holds 53 of 63 provincial legislature seats. Neither the Democratic Alliance, which polls well among white voters concentrated in urban areas and in the western part of the province, nor the Transkei-centered United Democratic Movement garnered 10 percent of the vote in 2004.

¶4. (SBU) Despite its dominance, the Eastern Cape ANC has not been without its problems and internal rivalries, and its relationship with then-President Mbeki was a complex one. Patrick Cull, political editor of the Port Elizabeth Herald, told Pol/Econoff that the provincial leadership has been divided since at least 1999, when the Eastern Cape ANC leadership put forward prominent anti-apartheid activist Mankhenkesi Stofile for renomination as provincial premier

against Mbeki's orders to present several candidates. Although Cull notes that Stofile -- who has been Sports Minister since 2004 -- is probably the province's most popular politician, his administrative skills are weak and his 1996-2004 tenure as premier was considered a disaster.

15. (SBU) Stofile's ineffectiveness prompted the national ANC, at Mbeki's behest, to intervene several times in the province, leading to the firing of four MECs in 2002 and a further shakeup in provincial leadership after Mbeki appointed Nosimo Balindlela as premier in 2004. Ultimately, Cull notes, these interventions by Mbeki led to the birth of pro- and anti-Mbeki factions, the latter of which opposed Mbeki's reelection as party president at the ANC's December 2007 Polokwane conference.

COPE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF MBEKI'S OUSTER, ANC RIVALRIES

16. (SBU) Given this fractious political environment, COPE has found fertile soil since it was formed after Mbeki's September 2008 recall as national President by the ANC. Thabisi Hoeane, a political science professor at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, told Pol/Econoff that despite Mbeki's difficulties with provincial ANC leadership, he remains very popular among residents of the province who are proud of their native son's accomplishments as national President. Mbeki's inauspicious ouster has further cemented his popularity, as Hoeane notes that several ANC leaders who voted against him at Polokwane were strongly opposed to his recall from office, viewing it as unnecessary and disrespectful. Many of these leaders -- at the local and provincial level -- have crossed over to join COPE.

17. (C) COPE leaders have in the past two months told Consulate officers they are confident they can win in Eastern Cape, and in Pol/Econoff's meetings in the province, interlocutors provided several reasons for COPE to be optimistic about its chances:

--Popular and respected leadership. Jolene Steyn-Kotze told Poloff and Pol/Econoff that ANC efforts to label COPE provincial leaders as "counter-revolutionary" or "relics of apartheid" are unlikely to gain much traction because they have strong liberation credentials and extensive popularity. Despite being dismissed as irrelevant by ANC leaders, the defection to COPE by 92-year old Epainette Mbeki, a lifelong ANC member, cannot be ignored. Balindlela's defection also is notable; although her tenure as premier was widely derided as ineffective, she received one of the loudest cheers at COPE's manifesto launch. Cull also noted that much of the Nelson Mandela Metro (Port Elizabeth) COPE leadership came from the Port Elizabeth People's Congress, an ANC-aligned organization during the 1980s that had great local credibility.

--Multi-racial and multi-regional appeal. Unlike the UDM and DA, COPE has potential appeal among all segments of the province's population. Cull thinks urban voters, both poor and middle-class, will see extensive appeal in COPE's promises to improve service delivery while not deviating much from the underlying "Mbekiite" policies that guide such delivery. Hoeane on the other hand noted that rural black voters -- a huge constituency in what is the country's least-urbanized province -- appreciate COPE's stated commitment to integrity and "traditional" values. He notes that rural voters in particular sympathize with COPE attacks on ANC Youth League President Julius Malema, who's vociferous calls for Mbeki's ouster are viewed as tremendously disrespectful coming from someone less than half the former President's age. Steyn-Kotze and Cull also think COPE can poll well among white voters. Cull noted that COPE's commitment to free-market principles and relative social conservatism are "mother's milk" to Afrikaner voters in the western part of the province. Cull said when DA provincial leader Athol Trollip recently addressed 100 commercial

farmers, all they asked about was COPE.

--Ethnic sympathies. Although such a message will go largely unsaid in the campaign, COPE also is likely to appeal to some ethnic Xhosa voters -- almost the entirety of Eastern Cape's black electorate -- who are bitter about Mbeki's ouster and a perceived loss of Xhosa political power at the hands of the Zulu Jacob Zuma. Traditional leaders from the six Xhosa kingdoms could play a role in quietly shaping this opinion. Pol/Econoff attended a meeting of traditional leaders at the amaRharhabe Great Place outside King William's Town on January 28 at which COPE leaders Mbazhima Shilowa and Mluleki George (an Eastern Cape native) addressed the king and representatives of over 300 traditional councils. Although traditional leaders ostensibly are politically neutral, Prince Zolile Burns-Ncamashe told Pol/Econoff that when his subjects ask for voting advice, he said he advises them to consider parties' track records and, laughing, "their potential track records," suggesting his own personal sympathies toward COPE.

--An electorate ready for an alternative. Steyn-Kotze and Hoeane emphasized that Eastern Cape voters (and South Africans writ large) are politically well informed and sophisticated in their voting choices. Yet while many voters have been dissatisfied with ANC performance in government, their identification with the ANC as the party of the liberation struggle and Nelson Mandela made it hard to vote against them. Now, however, COPE is bringing a message of change presented by a credible leadership that makes them a viable alternative. As Hoeane noted, the ANC cannot just ferry voters to the polls anymore, as these voters could very well place their X in the COPE box.

DA, UDM OPTIMISTIC, BUT GAINS UNLIKELY

18. (C) While DA and UDM provincial officials expressed to Pol/Econoff optimism about their chances later this year, COPE's rise appears likely to have a detrimental effect on both parties. DA provincial leader Athol Trollip told Pol/Econoff that he was very happy with the party's expansion in the province, particularly in the Transkei, and that he thought the party's decision to drastically boost spending on targeting black voters would pay off. Trollip dismissed COPE as "the other side of the ANC coin" and claimed the new party would soon lose its media luster, although he also noted the DA would be prepared to work with COPE after the poll if they prove themselves committed to the same principles.

19. (C) Cull was less sanguine about the DA's chances than Trollip, noting that the party has done next to nothing to expand its cadre of black leadership. Trollip himself acknowledged that seven of the DA's top ten names on its provincial list were white (and two are colored), although he emphasized that the party's number two is a black woman from the Transkei. Cull further noted that Trollip (who is seeking to become the party's national parliamentary leader after the elections) is a divisive figure in the province. Cull said Trollip is very similar to his one-time patron, former DA leader Tony Leon, in that he's arrogant and a bully, and many in the province have chafed at his overbearing leadership.

110. (C) UDM research Kwandiwe Toni expressed optimistic views similar to those of Trollip when describing the UDM's chances in the province, claiming the party had done well to expand its reach outside its traditional Transkei stronghold into the Border/Ciskei region near East London. However, neither Cull nor Hoeane has seen any evidence the party is expanding on this base, although both note Holomisa -- once the military leader of the Transkei homeland in the 1980s -- retains extensive popularity in the Transkei. They think the UDM will work closely with COPE after the election, and COPE Western Cape leader Avril Harding told Pol/Econoff Holomisa has had advanced unity discussions with COPE leaders, although he wanted to contest this poll on his own as a gauge

of his own personal popularity.

DESPITE CHALLENGES, ANC RETAINS TREMENDOUS ADVANTAGES

¶11. (C) Although COPE poses an unprecedented threat to ANC dominance in Eastern Cape, the ruling party still appears to be the favorite in Eastern Cape due to its overwhelming financial and organizational advantages. While Cull noted that COPE does have financial backing in the province, notably from businessman and Port Elizabeth native Saki Macozoma, it's nothing compared to the party, and state, resources the ANC can throw at the province. He noted that the party has been actively electioneering in the province since October, and Pol/Econoff saw extensive evidence of the ANC saturation campaign that is already underway. ANC posters are seen all over the province (mostly in East London and Port Elizabeth, but smaller towns as well), while party officials have adorned their cars with ANC stickers and photos of Jacob Zuma. No signs of COPE nor the DA were present, while Pol/Econoff spotted just a handful of UDM posters.

¶12. (C) The ANC also appears to be using the distribution of food parcels as a campaign tool already. Prince Zolile at the amaRharhabe Great Place showed Pol/Econoff a stack of maize meal, probably about 200kg worth, that had been given to the King by Social Development Minister Zola Skweyiya when he had visited the previous week. Mluleki George also told Pol/Econoff that the ANC had distributed food parcels during the January 28 municipal by-election in Alice, an election won by the ANC with 73 percent of the vote. When Pol/Econoff asked ANC provincial whip Humphrey Maxegwana later that day about whether such accusations were true, Maxegwana replied that while he could not speak to those specific examples, he said it was the right of the government (ie the ANC) to distribute food wherever it was needed. Hence it seems Qdistribute food wherever it was needed. Hence it seems likely such distributions will continue to occur as the election season progresses.

¶13. (C) Also, despite losing several provincial and local leaders to COPE, the ANC's effective election machinery does not appear to have suffered. ANC MPL and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality election coordinator Litho Suka told Pol/Econoff that the ANC has been campaigning door-to-door in the metro since September. Suka gave Pol/Econoff a copy of the party's 68 page election manual, which comprehensively (yet simply) explains the election process to volunteers, providing them with information on conducting a door-to-door campaign and materials for recording voter responses. Suka noted that the party is highly receptive to criticism from constituents, and the responses from volunteers door-to-door campaigning will be used to address voter concerns before the poll. Ultimately, it will be nearly impossible for a new party like COPE, much less the DA or UDM, to match this organizational acumen, particularly in just a couple of months.

TURNOUT HIGH, VIOLENCE LIKELY LOW

¶14. (C) Nearly all interlocutors thought turnout in this poll would be extremely high. Thami Mraji of the Independent Election Commission in East London told Pol/Econoff that the last round of voter registrations got extremely high turnout in the province, particularly among new voters. Both Hoeane and Steyn-Kotze noted that there was a great deal of enthusiasm about this poll from their students, suggesting that youth turnout -- declining in recent polls -- could see a turnaround. While hard to predict, most observers thought high turnout would favor COPE given the high degree of enthusiasm about the new party.

¶15. (C) Observers and political leaders were generally in agreement that the potential for widespread violence in the

province was low, although they acknowledged some incidents might occur. Mraji said the IEC is working with political and community leaders to establish a conflict management structure that can deal with disputes. Nonetheless, Mraji said such a hotly contested election was bound to have a few incidents. Cull and Steyn-Kotze also did not think there was potential for great violence, although they cited the independence and effectiveness of the South African Police Service as a key factor, as the force will not tolerate intimidation or violence.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) After spending time in Eastern Cape and talking to those watching the electoral machinations, it seems clear that COPE will make a splash at these polls. They have breadth, serious leadership, and a message that appears to appeal to voters. It's harder, however, to assess how much of a splash the party will make. When asked to peg COPE's real support in the province, several interlocutors shrugged their shoulders, noting that it will be hard to say in advance of the election. When pressed, most seemed to think COPE would poll between 20 and 30 percent of the provincial vote, with the DA and UDM probably lucky to hold onto the approximate combined 15 percent of the vote they received in ¶2004. None thought any opposition party or alliance would take the province from the ANC.

¶17. (C) There is no way of knowing how deep COPE support truly runs in the province, particularly absent any sort of reliable polling data, but the electoral math does not look as if it points to COPE or an opposition coalition governing Eastern Cape after next year. While there is a palpable "buzz" around COPE, it does not appear that its organizational structures will be sufficiently developed to take on the ANC, which is a masterful election party and still has deep emotional support among many segments of the population. We will be watching in the coming months to see how well COPE can mount an effective campaign in the province; whether any new high-level defections boost COPE's ranks; and how well the ANC can soothe the "Mbekiites" remaining in its midst, as these three factors will likely play key roles in influencing the provincial result.

MAYBERRY